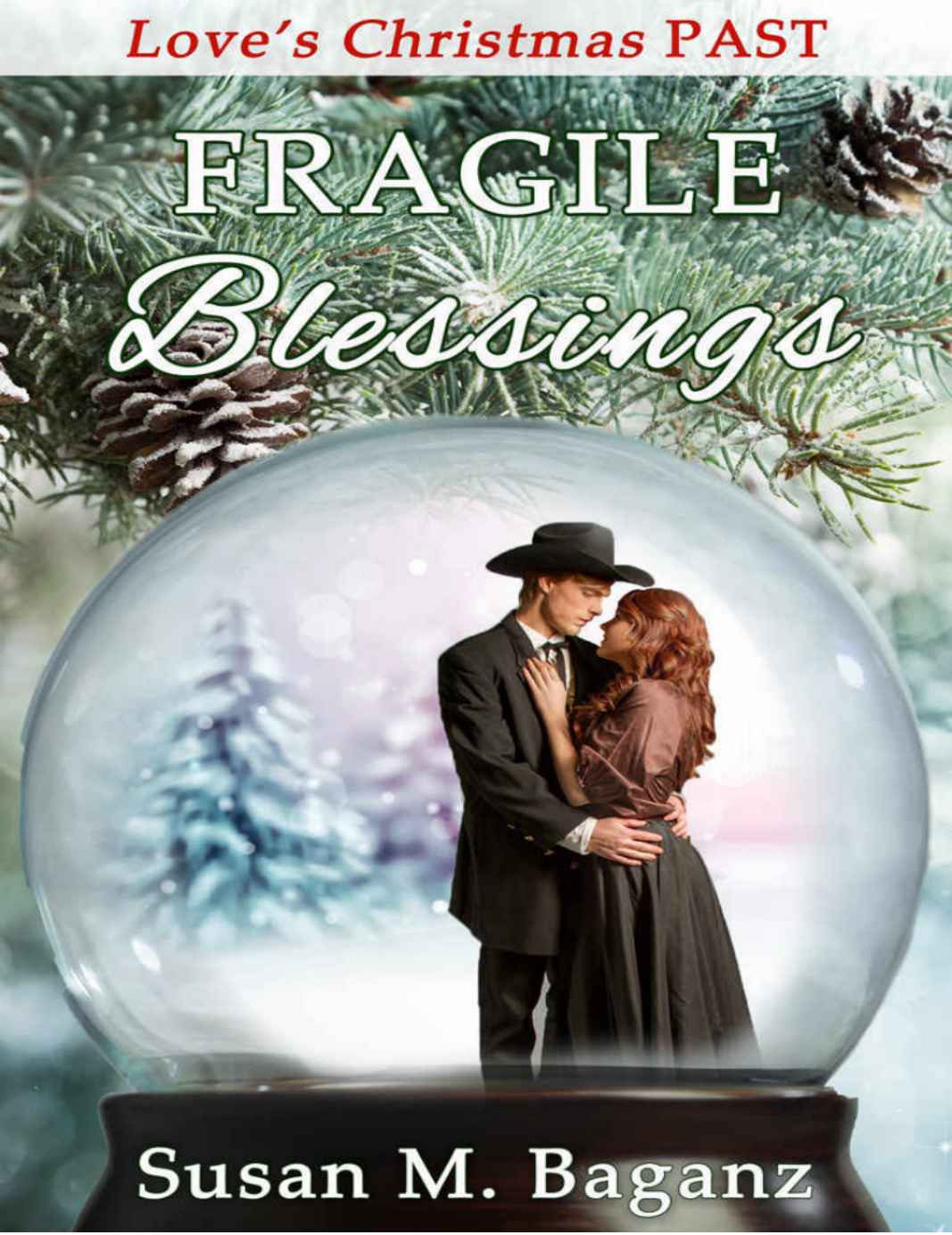
Love's Christmas PAST

FRAGILE Blessings



Susan M. Baganz

Table of Contents

Title Page
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DEDICATION
CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Sample
Thank you

FRAGILE BLESSINGS

Susan M. Baganz

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DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Marcella Fronk, who made summers as a child a wonderful time of freedom and love.

CHAPTER ONE

October 1881

Lily cried out and rolled over, grasping for her husband. Pain ripped through her entire body, freezing her in place. Waves of hot and cold washed over her all at once.

"Hmmmm?" Her husband managed to respond through a snore as he rolled away from her, taking most of the quilt with him.

"Grant!" she ground out through clenched teeth. "Help me." She latched onto his arm and clenched the solid muscle underneath the flannel nightshirt with as much force as she experienced across her midsection.

He sat up and turned towards her.

"The baby?"

She nodded, panic radiating from her. He paled.

"It's not time."

Leave it to him to state the obvious. "Ride for Mrs. Hughes."

He rose and started to dress. "I don't want to leave you here alone."

"Jack..." She gasped. Her breaths were shallow and rapid.

"He's a dog. What good will he be to you?" They both glanced to the foot of the bed where the black and white mutt raised his head to consider his humans as his long tail slapped the quilt.

"He will be a comfort and protection. Please hurry, Grant. Fetch the midwife."

Grant finished dressing, leaned over his wife of two years, and kissed her on the forehead. "Anything else I can do for you before I leave?"

"No. Just go."

He started for the door.

"And pray, Grant. Oh, please pray!"

He nodded as he shoved his feet into his boots. A jacket and hat followed, and he slapped his leather gloves into his hands as he headed out the door into the moonlit night.

* * *

Grant didn't bother saddling Molly, his most reliable mare. He threw on the bridal harness and pulled himself onto her back. He headed down the dirt path from their house to the main road leading towards Mrs. Hughes' home, closer to town. The rhythmic song of the crickets was a backdrop to the trotting of his horse as he navigated the muddy, pitted roads. He prayed for his wife, for their child, and that he would make it back to Lily in time.

He restrained the urge to travel faster as he traversed the roads. He

was a man of action, but risking his horse coming up lame was not a gamble he would willingly take. Especially when the lives of his wife and child hung in the balance.

Thoughts of self-doubt assailed him. His family wanted him to settle closer to them. His mother would have gladly helped them. Was he selfish in his desire to establish his own homestead? To carve out his place in the Wisconsin bluffs where he could shine God's love to his neighbors and share his faith as he farmed his land?

The other farm families claimed religion, but some built round barns to keep out evil spirits. People of the earth who would greet one kindly in town and then speak slander behind his back because he didn't hold to their brand of religion. Even his in-laws had sought to undermine his courtship of their daughter. While Lily's father had accepted him as a potential husband, her mother refused to do so.

Grant's mind came back to the present as the wind buffeted him and Molly. It was only a short distance further to the farm where the midwife lived with her husband. He hoped she was home, but where else would she be in the middle of the night? He wanted to kick himself for not hooking up the wagon. He would be thrilled to come back to find this was a nightmare and his bride slept peacefully. He would wake up to see her there and draw her into his arms as he often did, and revel in God's grace in providing him with his heart's desire.

He spied the house in the distance. All the lights were out except one. He pushed forward as rain poured from the sky. Combined with an increase in the wind buffeting his face, he shook his head, grateful that Lily had suggested he grow out his beard in the fall to help protect him from the elements when he had to work outdoors. God had blessed him with a wonderful wife. Oft times it tickled and prickled her, but she would only smile that special way of hers and tenderly stroke the facial hair as if it were her most favorite thing about him. He was certain it wasn't.

Grant finally reached the farm, dropped from his horse at the front door, and knocked softly at first. Why rouse the whole house if someone was awake? The door swung open and there stood Mr. Hughes. He pulled on his coat as he motioned Grant into the house.

"We expected you."

"You did?"

"The missus had a dream and woke me. I'm off to hitch the horse. Warm yourself a moment by the fire. My wife's almost ready to leave." The door opened again and the man departed in a gust of cold air.

Mrs. Hughes entered, shoved a mug of hot coffee into his hands, and pushed him toward the fire. She showed all manner of things into a big bag.

“Is anyone with Lily?” she asked.

“Jack.” He let the hot drink warm him up from inside. He’d likely need more of this through the night.

She nodded in response, her movements unceasing.

“You expected me?”

“God told me.”

“God woke you to tell you Lily was in labor?” How long had it been since God spoke to him that way?

“Not quite so specific. He told me a woman needed my help and to be ready.” With this, she stopped, her gaze penetrating his fatigue. “I feared it was Lily. It’s too early.” There was a firm line to her lips. She sighed and resumed shoving things in her bag. “Finish up. Your wife needs you. You go on ahead. We will not be far behind.”

“What am I to do when I get there?”

“Pray, offer comfort, whatever she will accept. If she wants to be held, hold her. If she doesn’t want to be touched, don’t. If you need to be busy, make some coffee. It’s going to be a long night.”

Grant downed the contents of the mug and placed it on the cupboard by the washbasin. Warmth spread outwards through his chest, but it never quite reached his fingers and toes. He wiggled his hands before the fire and put his gloves back on. “Thank you, ma’am.” He departed back into the cold autumn night. He gave Molly a pat on the nose before tossing himself onto her back and journeying home. At least this time, the wind was at his back.

* * *

Lily struggled to rise from the bed after Grant departed. She placed more wood on the banked fire and stoked the embers back to a flame to hold back the chill as well as the fear. She fell into the rocker while Jack sat sentinel at her feet. She rocked, her hands white-knuckled on the brown grained arms of the chair her husband made for her after he learned they were expecting their first child.

In spite of her pains, Lily smiled at the memory of her sturdy husband and his tears of joy when she told him about their child arriving in the New Year. After waiting for what seemed like so long to be with child, the pregnancy had gone as most do, with morning sickness, fatigue, and weird cravings. She giggled, remembering her husband’s tolerance for the strange meals she sometimes made and kept preparing for days on end. He never complained. He would smile, kiss her, and speak to the child she carried in her womb. She loved the tender side of the man she’d married.

But now, something was definitely wrong. She fought back tears at the thought that she might be burying their first-born. *Lord, why would you give us a child, let us come this far, only to take it away?* Shame filed her musings. In recent years, she’d attended many funerals for infants

who didn't survive the first year of life. She had delivered meals to the young wives, much like herself, while at a loss as to how to respond to their grief.

When she had asked the midwife, Mrs. Hughes, about it, she had responded, "God is sovereign over it all, Lily. He loves those babies more than any parent ever could. We grieve, we move on, and God provides comfort at times in surprising ways." Lily prayed for understanding and for acceptance of the reality of a world where babies were ripped from their mother's arms by death. She gulped again as pain overtook her.

Breathe. Inhale. Hold. Exhale slowly.

Her eyes squeezed shut as if to force out anything else, including morbid thoughts. As one contraction ended, Jack lifted his head and rested it on her knee. She released her grip from the chair and let her hand get lost in the softness of his fur. Somehow, he gave her comfort.

She longed in vain for her mother to be here, but they lived on a farm an hour's drive away by carriage, on the far side of Hillsboro, over nearer to Kendall. Would her mom really provide the comfort she sought? Lily shook her head and sighed. Leaning her head back against the chair, she welcomed the silence broken only by the creak of the rocker on the floor and the crackle of the flames keeping her warm. Her mom would have only brought criticism and division. She was better off right now with the Lord and Jack for company.

Without thinking, she began to hum. *Great is thy faithfulness, oh, God my Father, there is no shadow of turning with Thee…* the sound broke off as another wave of pain gripped her and held her gasping in its clutches. *Lord, what are You up to?* Tears came to her eyes and she longed for Grant's return.

* * *

Grant walked into the house to find his wife dozing by the fire, agony written across her features. He hung his wet clothes by the door, shhh'd the dog and added more wood to the fire. She stirred.

"Grant…" Her hand reached out to him.

He placed a kiss on the top of her head. He knelt by the rocker and placed his hand on her swollen stomach. "I love you, Lily." The muscles under his hand tightened beneath his touch and his wife gasped in pain. He frowned as the muscle released. Normally, when he would touch her stomach the baby would move, but there was no movement now.

"Shall I carry you back to the bed?" He reached for her as she nodded. He scooped her up awkwardly, and she whimpered in his arms as she wrapped an arm around his neck and rested her head against his chest. He placed her on the bed and sat down next to her. She curled as much as she could as she rolled to her side.

“We’ll get through this,” he whispered in her ear as he pulled her close to him while another contraction seized her. When it was over, she relaxed into his arms.

“I’m scared, Grant.”

“Me too, sweetheart. Me too.” He kissed her hair and prayed.

CHAPTER TWO

Lily slept, exhausted, on the bed. Grant pushed the hair off her face for the umpteenth time and thanked God for sparing the life of his bride. Mrs. Hughes walked in and handed him a small bundle—the cleaned body of the stillborn infant, wrapped in a beautifully knit blanket. The midwife nodded for him to take it.

"Why? He's dead."

"He is your child. A beautiful baby who is now with the Lord. You and Lily need to name him, plan a funeral and move on, trusting God to give you more."

Grant gingerly took the baby and held the bundle in the crook of his arm. It was late morning. He gazed into the face of this tiny person they had longed and prayed for. Perfect fingers and toes. Little cheeks and long eyelashes. Ginger colored hair, just like his. He touched a cheek tenderly. The body was still warm. He wished Lily would wake up to see their son.

Mrs. Hughes spoke softly. "Lily will be fine in time. She needs time to heal. I'll return tomorrow, but you may come for me if you need me." Her voice lost the confident professional tone as she continued. "Your son is beautiful, Grant. I won't pretend to understand why God would take such a perfect child away so young. I never do. You are a father, even if you don't get the pleasure of raising this little one." She wrapped her scarf around her head and secured it. "God will bless you and Lily, Grant. Trust Him." And with that, she left.

Grant gazed down at his little boy. God gave them a son and had taken the child away. The previous night had been a difficult one for Lily, and he'd prayed as he heard her cries from the other room. He'd wanted to be with her, but the midwife would not permit it. A man who helped heifers and mares give birth should surely be allowed with his wife during that process. He wife stirred next to him. He leaned over to plant a kiss on her cheek. "He's beautiful, sweetheart. When you wake up I will introduce you to our son."

* * *

The funeral was a small one at the Wesleyan church in Hillsboro. Lily's family refused to attend, believing the child was cursed as they had not baptized it. Those words cut deeply into her soul. She had not wept over the loss of their child. Instead, she held and rocked the baby before she'd handed it to Grant and returned to sleeping. After that, she never asked again to hold him. She couldn't bear it.

Something within her vanished along with the spirit of the little person who'd died within her. In spite of the quicksand of grief she drowned in, Lily insisted they stick with their plan to name their firstborn son after her husband. So Grant Rudolph Anderson, Jr. was

buried that early morning in October.

Mrs. Hughes visited two days later and encouraged Lily as she struggled with the changes in her body that continued to believe it was ready to care for a child that wasn't there. Several women provided meals. But at night, they were alone with their mutual grief, a wall between them.

Lily had been quiet as she tried to go about the normal daily chores. Fatigue weighed her down. One night, Grant sat across the table from her and as he finished eating, he spoke.

"God will give us other children," he said.

"You don't know that," she spat back.

"He has some kind of plan for us. I don't understand what it is, but we can trust Him. Whatever happens, children or not, I will always love you."

"You don't care if our baby died? As long as I'm here, that's enough?"

"Of course you are enough for me, Lily. Would I love for us to have a home bursting with children? Yes. But not without you to share it with."

"So the child meant nothing to you?"

Grant's jaw dropped. He shook his head. "That is not what I said." He ran his fingers through his hair and stared up at the wood ceiling of the home he had built for her with his own two hands. "I meant that I could not imagine raising children without you by my side. I would not want to do that without you. I love you. I need you, Lily."

"But you don't need children?"

"No. I don't. Not without you," he pleaded.

She glared at him, fury tearing up her insides. How could he so easily minimize all they had lost? What if she could never bear any more children? The thought broke her. Didn't he care? Had he wept over this child?

She really didn't know. She'd slept a lot, and he would often head to the barn to care for the animals and complete the final storage of the harvest as they prepared for winter and readied the fields for spring. Or chopped wood. It was as if he was avoiding her. She had failed as a wife. Her body had failed her as a woman. God had failed her. She rose and went to the bedroom and crawled into bed fully clothed. For the first time in days, she wept for all she had lost. Not only a baby, but also the death of her dreams of a family, her hopes, her faith, and the closeness she once shared with Grant.

* * *

Grant cleaned up the kitchen. He was lost. They never argued like this. She thought he didn't care? Grief beat him incessantly. As he milked the cows, the wound inside him bled. As he mucked out the

stalls, he ached with loss. As he worked in the fields, dreams buried themselves in the soil. His wife had become a stranger to him. How could he go to bed with her so angry with him?

She didn't return to the kitchen, and when he went in to try to talk to her she remained asleep. Of course, she was exhausted. Grant didn't even bother to undress. Instead, he stoked the fire, made another pot of coffee, and pulled out his Bible to seek God and pray.

Fatigue weighed him down on Sunday morning as he went to milk the cows before preparing for church. Their soft moos and the smell of hay and manure, at least, were familiar to him and comforting in a way. Life continued even in their sorrow. He was grateful it was the Sabbath with no major tasks to accomplish. Perchance he could get a nap. He had only dozed a few times in the rocker. He figured this strange creature who used to be his wife would probably leave him alone.

First, they needed to get through the gauntlet of well-wishers at church. The pitying stares, hushed whispers, and acting like everything was normal. Afraid to say anything to Lily that would make her cry.

Worship began with the hymn "Great is Thy Faithfulness." Lily sat silent and weeping through the song, and Grant longed to wrap his arm around her and draw her close. Given her refusal to speak to him that morning, he doubted it would be welcome. At the end of the service, Pastor Brown made an announcement.

"The O'Neill farm west of town suffered a fire last night. Please pray for the children who were orphaned as a result, especially for the infant born only a week past."

Grant's hand rose in the air without thought. "We'll take in the children."

Lily turned to him with her mouth agape, which she quickly covered with a delicate gloved hand. She rose from her seat and fled the small meeting room into the crisp fall morning.

Grant's face grew warm. He nodded his head and stood to follow his wife as the pastor announced the final hymn.

He found her pacing next to the carriage. Her mouth opened and closed several times before her sharp toned words burst forth. "What were you thinking? We cannot take those children!"

"Why not? We have a roof over our heads. They need a home. The baby needs a mother's milk, which you can supply. Just because we lost our son doesn't mean that this child has to die too."

"But…but…they are Catholic." She shivered.

"Like your family. God still loves them. Why should that be a deterrent to them being part of our family?"

"You never even *asked* me."

“Lily, I’m sorry. I never even asked myself. It was as if the Holy Spirit lifted my arm up. It was impulsive, but it’s the right thing to do.”

“Oh, Grant.” She launched herself at him, at first pummeling his chest with her small fists before collapsing against him with sobs wracking her body. He held her and waited. Cold seeped into his shirt, and he regretted leaving his hat inside. He withdrew a handkerchief and offered it to Lily as her crying wound down. She stood back, hiccupped, and nodded.

Sniff. “You are head of our household.” She straightened up and met his gaze. “We will take the kids. I will care for the infant. But you cannot make me love them.”

Grant nodded. “I will tell pastor, and we can head over to the Warner’s home to collect the children. Would you like to come back inside to get warm?”

Lily nodded and allowed him to escort her back into the church as the last hymn rang out amongst the small congregation.

* * *

Lily was quickly surrounded by other matrons in the congregation, offering commiseration over her loss and accolades for the willingness to take in another family’s children. Lily smiled weakly and nodded as the women gave her no chance to respond anyway. Mrs. Hughes pulled her away from the group to stand near the wood stove.

“Lily, dear. I realize this is hard for you. Maybe this is God’s bigger plan for your family. When I heard this morning of the death of their parents in the fire, my first thought was of you. You are the only woman in the area right now who could serve as a wet nurse.”

Lily shrugged and shook her head. “I told Grant I would allow this, but my heart rebels,” she whispered.

“Dear girl. You are young, and your loss has been great. But your son is in the hands of a loving God. We don’t know about the O’Neill’s souls. Those children don’t know about Jesus. The family didn’t attend church. Perhaps God preserved them for something better. Maybe this, dear sister, is your mission field.”

Lily swallowed hard. “I will obey my husband, Mrs. Hughes, but I don’t like it.”

“Nobody said you did. I will pray for you. I think you might be surprised at what God will do through the blessing of these three orphans.”

Lily turned away to find Grant. God may be up to all kinds of things, but she really wasn’t interested in His plans. He killed their son. He left three children orphans. What kind of God did these things? How could Grant believe so unflinchingly?

CHAPTER THREE

Lily's heart froze when presented with the infant. Wrapped in blue flannel cloth, he screamed at her and waved his fists because he was hungry. Mrs. Hughes accompanied them to meet the children and help Lily navigate nursing the infant.

Sitting in the bedroom, shut off from the chaos in the main quarters, Lily gasped in painful surprise as the newborn clamped down. Mrs. Hughes coached her. "It will get better, but it's going to take time. He's a pro already, and you've never had the experience. Trust me. This will be good for you both."

The ride home with the three young children in the back of the wagon seemed interminably long. Lily couldn't bear to hold the baby and handed it off to the oldest, a six-year-old, grey-eyed, red-haired girl named Colleen. The middle child, Simon, had dark curly brown hair and blue eyes. He was four. Both children were timid in the face of all the changes they had undergone in the past twelve hours.

* * *

Grant ushered the newly formed family into the house and quickly set up pallets for Colleen and Simon, and a small nest near their bed until he could complete the crib he'd begun construction on a month ago. Assured by Lily that she was okay, he invited Simon out to the barn to help him.

"Sir, I want my Ma and Pa," the little boy said softly as they walked out, side by side.

"I know, son. I'm sorry. Do you think you could learn to let me be like a "pa" to you for now?"

The little boy stuck his thumb in his mouth and didn't answer, but allowed his other hand to reach up and hold Grant's.

Grant's heart melted. Together, they entered the barn, and handing Simon a piece of sandpaper, they silently went to work on finishing the crib for the infant.

* * *

"Ma'am?" asked Colleen.

"Yes?"

"Are you my new mama?"

Lily sighed. "No one could replace your mother, Colleen."

"But she's gone, isn't she?

"Yes, I'm afraid she is."

"And Da is gone too?"

"Yes," Lily whispered, almost afraid to say the words. How much did the little girl understand about the finality of death? How much did Lily?

"Good."

Lily turned away from the stew warming on the stove and knelt down in front of the little girl. “Why would you say that?”

“He was mean to Ma.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but I’m sure you didn’t wish for him to die.”

“I did wish it. I prayed. I asked God to take away my Da and help my Ma not to cry no more.” Tears ran down her plump cheeks. “God answered my prayers. But I didn’t want Ma dead. Only Pa. Why did God kill my Ma?”

Lily leaned down and reached out a hand to touch the shoulder of the little girl. Colleen launched herself into Lily’s arms and clasped her tightly around the neck. Soon, her dress was soaked with the tears. Lily wrapped her arms around the girl, held her close, and allowed her own tears to fall—for Colleen, for herself, and for all they had both lost.

* * *

Lily peered out the window as Grant and Simon ventured from the barn into the cold and back to the house. Simon walked tall with his hands in his coat pocket and a smile on his little face. An imitation of the man walking by his side.

Colleen had helped punch dough for bread for dinner, and now, the scent of fresh baked bread filled the house. Colleen smiled shyly at Lily and asked if she could bring her baby brother in for his feeding as he started to whimper.

“Thank you, Colleen. Do you think you can handle him?”

“Ma would let me hold him. She only ever touched him to feed him. I even changed his cloths.”

The poor baby. What mother wouldn’t want to touch her child? Lily couldn’t grasp such neglect. “I appreciate the big help you are, Colleen. You may fetch him for me. Did your mother teach you how to read?”

“What’s reading?” The little girl handed over the infant gently.

“That is when you look at letters on a page and make them into words, sentences, and stories.”

“Stories?”

“Your Ma told you stories, didn’t she?”

“She said Da told stories that were lies. Ma didn’t like stories.”

“Did she ever read the Bible to you?”

“What is the Bible?” The little furrows between her eyes proved the truth of these innocent questions.

“It’s a book written by God to help us understand who He is, how He worked through history, and how He wants us to live.”

The little girl shook her head in confusion. “I don’t know about God.”

“Would you like to learn?” Lily asked.

Colleen shrugged.

“Mr. Anderson will read from the Bible tonight after dinner.”

Colleen dropped her head, and Lily wondered at all that weighed the poor mite down. Was it any wonder when the children had lost their home and parents and were thrust into depending on new people they didn’t even know*? And I resented Grant for wanting to take them in. The reality is, he was more in touch with the Holy Spirit than I was, seeking refuge in my grief and anger towards God and Grant over losing our son. Forgive me, Lord.*

She peered down at the infant suckling and batting his hand on her breast. How could any mother not want this child? The very thought was ladled with guilt, as if loving this child was a betrayal of the one they buried only days ago.

And why did this little boy have red hair? It made no sense that God would take away their son but leave this child unwanted, unloved, and then an orphan. This child was larger than Grant Junior, having been born full-term. This baby was plump, and Grant had been thin. Grant had small cheeks, and this little one boasted a more pronounced chin. A little hand wrapped around her finger, holding tight. How long would they be caring for these kids? *God, what are you up to?*

* * *

Upon entering the house, Grant helped Simon take his coat off. He glanced over at Lily as she rocked with the nursing babe while Colleen played with a makeshift doll at her feet. Lily glanced up and their eyes locked. Did her face convey the weight of sadness and send the intended silent reproach for forcing this immediate family upon her?

He frowned, turned away, and picked up Simon, hugged him close and began tickling him. The boy giggled and kicked. Grant grinned and set him down with one more quick hug.

Simon ran to where Colleen sat and told her about his afternoon adventures.

Grant’s carefree play filled Lily with jealousy. How dare he enjoy someone else’s kid with theirs fresh in the ground? She would not reproach him. He was the head of their household. He opened their home and his heart as an act of charity to these orphaned children. Surely, she could provide a home for them. But that didn’t mean she had to love them.

* * *

Grant washed up as the children played at Lily’s feet. He experienced a bittersweet joy. He longed for their children to be playing there, not someone else’s. He had been horrified at the things Simon shared with his limited words about the home he had known.

Living with Lily and himself had to be better for them. Wouldn't it?

Lily finished feeding the infant and rose from her chair. She walked over to him by the stove and handed over the baby.

"What am I supposed to do with him?" Sudden terror gripped him. What if he dropped the infant?

"Hold him. Burp him. Talk to him. I don't care. Just keep him content while I put supper on the table. Colleen, can you come and help me?"

Grant lifted the infant to his shoulder and rubbed the child's back. A loud belch was his reward.

Colleen finished setting the table and stood off to the side of the room, waiting silently as Lily placed the food on the table with her usual quick efficiency.

The infant's eyelids closed as he sucked his fist. So tiny.

Simon came to stand next to his sister, hopping from foot to foot. "I'm hungry," he whispered.

Grant nodded to the washbasin. "You'll get food soon enough. Go wash your hands and use the soap. When you return, we'll sit down to the meal Mrs. Anderson has prepared, after we pray our blessing."

Simon washed and once again stood next to his sister. Grant remembered being that age and always hungry. "What's a blessing, Mr. Anderson?"

Grant motioned them to take a seat as he pulled out the chair for Lily and then sat himself. He settled the sleeping infant in the crook of one arm, freeing up the other to eat.

"We thank God for His provision for our needs," Lily offered.

The children glanced at each other in confusion. Grant bowed his head and began to pray. Lily folded her hands and bowed her head as well. Out of the corner of his eyes, Grant spied the children as their wide-eyes took in the adults at the table. They bowed their heads and clasped their hands together.

"Lord, we thank you for this day, for the food you've provided, and the lovely hands that prepared it. We also thank you for the gift of these children. Amen."

The kids slowly put their hands down, imitating the adults. Lily spooned soup into their bowls and handed them each a hearty slice of buttered bread.

"We get to eat all of this?" Simon asked with a mouthful of bread.

"We don't talk with our mouths full. That is not good manners. As to your question, if you can eat it all, you are encouraged to do so. God has never let us go hungry. He has been good to us."

"God must not like our family," Colleen said simply. She spooned soup slowly into her mouth and closed her eyes as if savoring it.

Lily glanced at Grant who took the hint. "I'm sure God loved your

family, Colleen. Sometimes, He allows us to suffer from our poor choices. Unfortunately, that means others sometime suffer as well. But that is never God's choice for any of us, but a consequence of sin."

Colleen's head tilted to one side. "Why would God make us suffer because our Da was mean?"

"Oh," Lily started, "I don't think God caused it, but He did allow it. I don't pretend to understand why."

The children glanced at each other and proceeded to finish their food. He suspected there were many other questions and prayed silently that God would give him the right answers. More importantly, he asked God to let them be the right answer in how they showed love to the orphans. Where else could they go anyway?

CHAPTER FOUR

Lily shook her head as her husband devoured another bowl of stew while holding the baby in the crook of his arm. He seemed at ease holding this child. How could he care for this infant when theirs was gone? Frustration welled up within her.

She yawned. Last night, she had tossed and turned after their argument, leaving her exhausted. She was aware he never joined her in bed, and once, she rose to check on him and found him on his knees with his lips silently moving. Grant had dark circles under his eyes. Not easy to spot in the candlelit room and given his ruddy complexion from time spent outdoors. He'd told her when they were courting that he didn't ever want to go to bed angry with her. He had kept his vow. He hadn't gone to bed at all. But was he still angry?

They never resolved their argument, but with three children added to the mix, would that ever happen? She wasn't sure she was ready to forgive him. She couldn't understand how he could so quickly put the loss of their son behind them.

The thought crossed her mind. Did Grant express grief differently? *God, could that be true? Are You trying to tell me something?*

"Are you well, Lily?" Grant gazed at her with concern in his eyes. Eyes that had wooed her as his young bride.

"What?" She had been so lost in thought she hadn't taken a bite to eat. "Oh, I'm fine." She picked up her spoon and began to eat even though she lacked an appetite.

"I think we need to take the children to the mercantile in town and purchase clothing for them to wear."

"Can we afford that?" Lily asked.

"Not really, but it is necessary. God will provide. They lost everything in the fire and only possess the clothes they came with. We need to get something for them."

"I made clothing for our son." Lily tried to swallow her jealousy that her own son would not benefit from the fruit of her labors in sewing those clothes.

Grant nodded as he looked down at the sleeping babe. "That will help. I can take Simon and Colleen in the morning. Would you like to join us?"

"I think it would be better for the baby to stay indoors."

Grant frowned. "I bow to your wisdom in that." He finished the last piece of his warm, buttered bread. "We need to think of a name for this lad."

"Why wouldn't they name him?" Lily wondered aloud.

"Da said the baby wasn't his so he weren't going to give it a name," Simon said cheerfully, not fully grasping what he revealed.

Colleen nodded her head. “Ma said she didn’t think he would live anyway, he was so scrawny, so why bother?”

“Every child deserves a name,” Lily retorted.

Collen focused on her hands. “Yes, ma’am, if you say so.”

“I’m sorry if I sounded angry, children. Please forgive me.”

Simon and Colleen’s jaws dropped. They glanced at each other.

“Is there something wrong?” Grant asked.

“Adults don’t say sorry,” Colleen blurted out and covered her mouth. Her eyes were wide with fear.

“In our home, they do. We may be adults, but we still make mistakes and apologize for them. With God’s help, we try to do better. That’s what followers of Jesus do.”

“Oh, we don’t follow Jesus. We’re Catholic,” Colleen piped up cheerfully

Grant sighed. “Do you understand what it means to be Catholic?”

Collen shook her head. Simon imitated his sister.

“Did you go to church?” Grant asked.

The two little ones shook their heads again.

“Did your parents ever talk to you about God?”

“They spoke His name, but He sounded like an angry person we didn’t want to meet,” Colleen offered.

“Oh, children.” Lily eyed them with tenderness. “God is wonderful. He punishes sin, true, but He also loved us so much that He sacrificed His only son for us so we could have life in Him. When we accept that gift, God lets us go be with Him when we die. And He gifts us with the power to live like His son, Jesus, while we are here.”

Brows scrunched and lips pursed, Colleen finally responded. “He killed His son? For me?”

Lily nodded, and it hit her as she glanced over at the baby lying snuggled up to her husband’s chest with little fists clutching his shirt. Could she trust God enough to leave her precious son in His hands while she cared for the three little lives He entrusted them with? Was He asking her to give up her son, just as He did, to save the lives of others? Grant slurped as he cleaned the bottom of his bowl with another slice of bread. “Grant?”

He glanced up at her. “What?”

“The children never had a story read to them. I was telling Collen about the Bible today and told her you would read to them tonight.”

Grant’s eyes lit up and crinkles appeared as he grinned. “I would be honored.”

“If you will hand the baby over, I will lay him down and clean up the dishes while you sit with the children.”

* * *

Later, Grant knelt and prayed with the children as he tucked them

into pallets.

"I'm scared," Simon said as he stuck his thumb in his mouth and wrapped his free hand around the other to make sure it wouldn't slip out.

"I'm not," Colleen said confidently as she snuggled her pillow.

"Why not?" Simon asked, his question muffled by his thumb

"Because God gave us a new ma and pa. It's a…blessing." Colleen closed her eyes and Simon glanced up at Grant.

"God is caring for you, Simon, even if you can't see or feel Him. His love wraps around you tighter than this quilt. And we are here for you if you need us." Grant bent over and planted a kiss on the little boy's hair and on Colleen's as well. "Sleep well, children. I'm glad God brought you to us." With that, he rose and went to the master bedroom where his wife was with the infant.

He entered the room. Lily held the babe in her arms and gently caressed his face. "You are good with the children, Grant. I'm seeing a different side to you."

"Did you doubt I would be a good father?" he asked as he sat down beside her on the mattress.

She glanced up at him then. "I guess I really didn't think about it. I imagined everything would be wonderful. Tragedy couldn't touch us. It was magical, the way He brought us together, and I guess I thought that 'magic' would continue as we lived a charmed life."

"We do."

"He took our son."

"Perhaps that was a gift?" Grant put a hand up. "Hear me out, please, Lily. I would really like to sleep in our bed tonight. I was thinking and praying all last night. What if God was saving our son from something worse than death? What if, as perfect as he seemed, he would have had other problems we couldn't deal with? What if it was more merciful to let us see His glory in our perfect little son, and his mercy in allowing our boy to avoid all the pain and suffering in this world?

"I'm not saying I like it, or that I'm glad God took Grant Junior. But if I believe He is really God, then I need to somehow grasp that His plans are bigger, grander than mine. Maybe it was even because you and I need to learn to grow in a new way that keeping our son wouldn't have allowed. He knew that we would never have considered opening our home to these children in their greatest time of need if we were still waiting for our own child to be born. Think about it, Lily. If Grant had waited to arrive in the new year as planned, you would not have been able to sustain the life of this little boy right now. What if God has a plan for this child, and He has now entrusted His soul into our care to raise and nurture?"

Silence hung heavy between them.

"I'm sorry I was so angry last night. I feel like I lost a part of myself. I'm angry with my body and struggle with God for taking our son. I said many things I regret. Will you forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you, Lily. Will you forgive me for failing to understand the depth of your pain and grief? Sometimes I'm not a very smart guy, but I'm willing to learn if you will teach me."

Lily reached her free hand out and clasped his. "I forgive you."

Grant leaned forward and kissed his wife, grateful for the restored relationship between them. He reached out to touch the baby's cheek. "What should we name him?"

"Can we name him?"

"We are going to keep him, aren't we? That would give us the right."

Lily stared into his eyes for a time and nodded. "I think you are right. Our only reasonable response is to keep these children and raise them as our own. God may give us more in time. I always dreamed of a large family."

"I'll wire my brother tomorrow to start adoption paperwork to make it official, but this little man needs a name."

Together they gazed at the sleeping child.

"Tobin," Lily whispered. The infant opened his eyes and gazed at her, closed them again, and snuggled closer.

"Tobin it is," Grant said. "All the kid's names end in 'n', was that your intent?"

"No. He just seemed like a Tobin to me."

"Do you known any Tobins?"

Lily shook her head.

"I guess it doesn't matter, does it? He approves of his name." The child cooed.

"He did, didn't he?" Lily leaned against her husband as he put his arm around her and held her close, planting a kiss on the top of her head.

As they settled into bed that night, his arm holding Lily close, Grant allowed himself a half a grin at the sound of the call of a great horned owl to his mate and her response. Yes. A call. God had called him to this place and time.

He remembered meeting Lily at the Vernon County Fair. It was as if the sunshine existed only to illuminate her. She was similar to many of the young farm lasses, but with Lily, there was something different. A purity. A joy. As if she kept a secret only he could unearth.

The young men had been enchanted with Lily, and he was the new man in town trying to prove himself. He won the roping competition and a wreath had been placed around his horse's neck. He pulled a

rose out and strode over to where she sat. He exhibited more confidence than he really had when he kissed the flower and presented it to her with a wink before riding away. He shook his head at his own audacity. He had known from the moment he had spied her that this was the woman he was destined to marry and spend the rest of his life with.

Thank you God, for Lily and these children. Let Grant Junior know we love and miss him. Take good care of my son for me, will you? I appreciate it.

CHAPTER FIVE

A week passed. The kids had new clothing, and Lily began to find a new rhythm to her days in caring for three children. Grant spent time praying with them in the morning, and sometimes, Simon joined him in the barn to learn the chores. Colleen learned how to collect eggs and help with the baby. Tobin settled into a regular pattern of eating and sleeping, and began to fill out. Lily wondered if she would ever sleep through the night again.

Sunday was upon them. It would be their first time taking all three children to church.

"I get to wear that?" Collen asked as Lily held out a dress she had worked on all week for the little girl, made of fabric she had saved for a dress for herself. It was light green with some darker green and white trim. Lily washed and brushed Colleen's beautiful auburn hair until it glistened in the morning light.

"Yes, Colleen, I made it for you. We all own what we call our Sunday clothes. Special clothes we wear to church to show honor and respect to God. We want to give Him our very best in everything we do, and so we try to do that in the way we dress when we go to worship Him."

Colleen waited until Lily tied a bow in the back of the dress before she twirled in a circle. Her new boots peeked out beneath the hem. "Oh, thank you, Mama! Thank you!" Collen hugged Lily around the waist before spinning again. Lily grinned. She remembered her own childhood joy at a new dress and the fun of spinning so the skirt would flare. She'd intentionally made it longer than normal as she suspected this child was going to sprout up soon. Seams could be let out and the longer skirt provided extra warmth. Colleen's joy chipped away at the grief she still carried.

Simon had been dressed with care by Grant in a smart new shirt, pants, and new boots. His curly brown hair was combed back off his face into orderly waves, which probably wouldn't stay that way for long. His blue eyes twinkled.

"You look wonderful, Simon," Colleen exclaimed.

Lily wrapped Tobin warmly to place in a box to sit in the back with the two children who would also be wrapped in warm quilts. Soon, they were on their way.

The family garnered nods of approval as they strode into the small white church and took up a row. Collen and Simon sat between Lily and Grant, and Tobin slept on Lily's shoulder.

After the service, the adults crowded around to meet the newly expanded family and offer support to the young couple. Other children came to meet Colleen and Simon, and soon, the younger

children were playfully chatting amongst the wooden pews of the church with the smallest ones running between the benches.

Mrs. Hughes was the first by Lily's side. "The baby is healthier under your loving care."

Warmth filled Lily at the compliment. "He's been a good baby. I miss sleeping, though."

The midwife laughed. "Someday, you'll get to sleep again. How are the other children adapting?"

"This morning, Colleen called me Mama for the first time. From what I understand, they had a difficult life."

Another young matron, Jennifer, shook her head. She had been a neighbor to the O'Neill's. "True. Did you name the infant?"

"Tobin."

"Tobin. It fits him. You are doing a wonderful thing by taking them in."

Lily frowned. "God knew I needed them."

Mrs. Hughes smiled. "I will continue to pray for you all. Tobin can never replace the child you lost, but love him well, and he will be a comfort to you."

"I will do my best, Mrs. Hughes."

With farewells spoken, the young family was bundled up and in the carriage for the trip home. Lily anticipated an afternoon of reading, talking, and playing games with the children. Other than necessary chores, they attempted to keep the Sabbath holy as Scripture dictated.

* * *

Grant climbed into bed, drew his wife close to him, and kissed her. "We need to think about Christmas. It's coming up soon, and now I need to provide for three children."

"Do you have any ideas?" Lily asked in a whisper.

"I want to build a truck with moving wheels for Simon. It's been hard to start since he's become my shadow, except for when he takes his afternoon nap. When the weather is fair, I need to be out in the fields finishing up the corn harvest."

"It sounds perfect for him, and there is time. I want to make a rag doll for Colleen, but find it difficult as well. She is underfoot, and when I'm not teaching her about homemaking, I'm working on teaching her letters and numbers."

"What about Tobin?"

"I'll use some scrap material to make some soft rattles for him to play with and chew on."

"And what does my lovely bride want for Christmas?"

She paused, sighing heavily. "I wish our son was with us, but he is in heaven with Jesus. These children are only beginning to learn

about our Savior."

"They seem to fit in here, but it's only been a week since they've lost their parents."

"I agree, and they moved too quickly past their loss. It worries me. What if the adoption falls through? I doubt I could survive losing all three children."

"They are orphans. We don't need to adopt them officially. I want to do it so *they* know they are wanted."

"Is it wrong to take their last name from them?" She moved Tobin to the new crib.

"They can keep it as part of their middle names and heritage. I won't ask them to forget or deny their lives before they came here."

"You are right, as always."

"I'm always right?" Grant chuckled softly.

"Well, of course," Lily teased as she kissed his neck, tickling him.

"It's good to know that you realize it, dear." He tickled her with his beard before giving her another kiss and snuggling her close as they fell asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

November

A sharp rap at the door startled Lily. Jack was at the door, barking. She rushed over and peeked out the window to see who it was. Pastor Brown. She opened the door to let him in.

"Preacher, what can I do for you today?"

Colleen rose from the table where she worked on writing her letters. Simon stood up from where he played by the fireplace with blocks of wood Grant had given him. Both moved closer to Lily, soon clinging to her skirts.

"It is safe, children. Preacher is here for a visit." She gave a smile. "Shall I put the hot water on?"

"I would be grateful for something warm to drink. Is Grant around?"

"He is in the barn, but I expect him in shortly. He probably saw you arrive. Won't you sit?" She pointed to the chair closest to the fireplace. "I'll get some coffee." She turned to her task, swallowing down the fear that something was amiss.

* * *

Grant saw the preacher arrive, hastened through his chore, and headed to the house. He gave Jack an absentminded pat on the head as he strode in to greet the visitor. He accepted a mug from Lily and sat down in his favorite chair.

"I hated to come out here to bother you and the misses, but there is some disturbing news, Grant."

"What kind of news?" Grant sat up straighter in his chair and Lily came to stand beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"It seems Mr. O'Neill had distant family after all. They are now inquiring about the children."

"We just received the adoption papers signed by the judge. They can inquire all they want, but the children are now legally ours."

"I understand. You did a generous thing, Brother Anderson. But I wouldn't put it past this family to make trouble for you. It seemed prudent to give you some warning."

Grant reached up and put his hand on top of Lily's. Simon and Colleen came to stand on the other side of his chair.

"They are not going to take us away, are they, Ma?" asked Colleen.

"No," answered Grant. "God brought you to us, and we intend to honor our promise to care for you."

"The enemy likes to seek and destroy, Brother Anderson. Beware and be careful. Many like to take the law into their own hands."

"Christ would not desire me to abdicate my responsibility to my

family. He calls me to serve and sacrifice for them if necessary. These children are a gift from the Lord, not objects to be tossed about."

"Grant," Lily admonished softly. "We do not need to borrow trouble from tomorrow. Let us pray and wait and listen to God's leading in whatever happens."

Grant sighed and glanced to the preacher. "God has gifted my wife with wisdom. I will heed her advice in this. Thank you for coming to warn us. Better to be prepared than unaware of the battle we might face."

"Given that the family is Catholic, there may be a strong objection to the children being raised in another faith."

"That is irrelevant. Most Catholics I've met love Jesus too, and it is only our traditions and practice of our faith that differs. The children are our responsibility before God. We are subject to no one else's dictates in the matter of faith." Lily's voice was stronger now. Grant nodded. Lily had been raised in the Catholic tradition.

Preacher nodded. "I will continue to pray for your family."

Grant nodded and stood to extend his hand. "Thank you, Brother Brown."

The preacher put on his coat and placed his hat on his head. "Peace to this house." He nodded to the children and departed.

Five days later, when Grant went to town, there was a telegram waiting for him from Clyde O'Neill, some distant relative.

Send O'Neill children by train to Kansas City.

Grant posted a return telegram.

Children legally adopted and will remain here.

With only a few days to go before Thanksgiving, he also sent a telegram to his brother, asking for advice. The response came from a day later.

Adoption final. Fight if you must stop Law on your side.

Grant spent more and more time out in the barn, on his knees in prayer.

* * *

Thanksgiving had passed, and Lily enjoyed preparing for Christmas. No tree would decorate the living area as they planned to travel to visit family. Evergreen boughs rested on the mantle, trimmed with red ribbons and a few pinecones. Lily worked, with some help from Colleen, at making stockings for the children. She had thought she would never find joy without her own child in her arms, but these little children had sunk roots deep into her heart in such a short time. Grant explained to the children how adoption worked and how God adopted all of them into His family, if they wanted to be a part of that.

The children, who had arrived thin and wan, were now plump with rosy cheeks and ready smiles. Even little Tobin smiled for her,

and Lily experienced sorrow for the mother who died without experiencing that kind of joy. How different life could be when one was lost without the hope of the cross.

* * *

December approached rapidly and Lily baked cookies with the kids while playfully slapping away little hands eager to lick frosting. She baked cakes along with loaves of bread to give to neighbors and take home on their visit to family in a few days. Grant's parents expressed delight at the prospect of meeting their new grandchildren. Lily was sad that her own parents refused to acknowledge their little family. Because of that, Grant and Lily chose to travel early to visit his family. Lily was nervous and excited. They had not seen his family since they wed two years ago. Grant had been so busy on the farm. Lily knew her husband longed to be with his family again and show off his little family. It would be a wonderful Christmas.

* * *

A new telegram arrived.

Arriving 15 Dec to claim children.

Grant debated whether to make the sheriff aware of this potential challenge, but instead, ripped up the telegram and threw it in the stove at the General Store. He purchased more ammunition. He wouldn't go down without a fight if that was called for. He smiled, knowing that the children were not going to be on the homestead on that date anyway.

CHAPTER SEVEN

December

The wagon was loaded up the night before for the day-long journey to LaCrosse. Grant arose early and heated bricks to keep little feet warm. Soon, Lily awoke and fed Tobin. With a quick breakfast, the kids were scooped up and settled in the back of the wagon along with Lily. It was a mild December. The winding, hilly roads were passable and the journey, though long, was uneventful. The bluffs they drove past were stark and breathtaking, outlined with snow and the outcroppings of pine trees. Occasionally, the kids spied eagles and hawks out for their daily hunt for food. They watched deer scavenging for food in the fallow fields.

They arrived before dark. Grant unloaded his wife and children at the front door to a large home on the outskirts of the city. He took the horse and wagon off to the carriage house around back. The Anderson home was different from his humble homestead back in Hillsboro. Grant grinned to himself, grateful that his wife was willing to live a simple, if more difficult, life with him rather than pushing him to take up the family business. If he had never left the safety of his hometown, he'd never have met his sweet bride.

* * *

Lily shepherded the children into the foyer of the house. The little ones stood slack-jawed at the tall ceiling and wallpapered walls. The curving staircase rising to one side puzzled them. They clung to her skirts. The butler who granted them entrance had failed to return. Lily nudged the children gently to the fireplace along one wall so they could warm up after such a long journey.

"Darling Lily." An elegant matron entered the room, her red hair, streaked with white, pulled back into the perfect chignon. Lily inwardly lamented that she'd never mastered getting her hair to appear so perfect.

"Mrs. Anderson, we are grateful for your hospitality."

"Call me Mother, please. So these are my lovely grandchildren. Let me see." The elder Mrs. Anderson tapped her finger on her lips and surveyed the children carefully. "You, young lady, must be Colleen. Your hair is beautiful, just like mine when I was a little girl. I'm sure the boys are chasing after you already."

Colleen giggled. "I'm only six, ma'am." She gave a small curtsey.

"Well done, child. Charming." She turned to the four-year-old who had his thumb firmly in his mouth. "Now, let me guess, this young gentleman must be Simon. I'm guessing you are quite the man about the house, helping your mother."

Simon stopped sucking for a moment and smiled before ducking his face into Lily's skirt.

Mrs. Anderson came forward and reached out for the infant in Lily's arms. "And this must be my newest grandson, Tobin." Lily handed the baby to her mother-in-law. Mrs. Anderson held the child close, gazed at him, and gave him back to Lily with tears in her eyes. "My dear, I don't pretend to understand the pain of losing a child, but if anyone ever met you and Grant for the first time with these children, it would be obvious to anyone that they are yours." She ran a finger gently along Tobin's cheek, only to find him grabbing it. She smiled at the infant and then back at Lily.

"I'm sure Grant will be in momentarily. Why don't we get you to your rooms so you can rest and freshen up? Charles will bring your bags up momentarily, and then in an hour or so, we can meet again in the back family room and be comfortable together. The rest of the family will arrive tomorrow. I wanted some time before they all came so I could spend time with you. Come, follow me." She headed for the staircase and started to climb, followed by the little family.

The younger two children were placed in a room together and given a maid to care for their needs. Next door, were Lily and Grant, with a bassinet set up for Tobin.

"Mrs. Anderson, thank you for having us."

"I wanted so much to come to you when Grant wrote with news about the baby." She motioned Lily to come and sit by the fireplace on some lovely embroidered chairs made with exquisite design. "Harold would hear nothing of it. I prayed for you and longed to be a comfort to you. I'm grateful that you were all able to come to see us. I know the weather this time of year can make travel difficult." The infant still slept snuggled in her arms. "I cannot believe the red hair. One would almost believe you bore this child. He bears a strong resemblance to Grant as a baby."

Lily teared up. "Grant Jr. also had red hair. He was smaller, of course, having come so early, but Mother, he was perfect in every way…soft cheeks, perfect fingers and toes. That soft red hair, maybe slightly darker than Tobin's and not as thick—but still..."

"Has it been hard to care for Tobin instead?"

Lily nodded. "I am beginning to love this little boy, but I feel like I'm betraying my own flesh and blood child."

"I think your feelings are normal. We will pray that you will know the joy again of having your own child to hold. But how amazing the timing of this infant coming into your arms so soon after your loss."

Lily nodded.

"Why don't you lie down for a while and rest? I'll take Tobin with me until he's ready to be fed again." Mrs. Anderson rose and started

for the door.

"Thank you, Mother." Lily said.

"I'm delighted you came." With that, the older woman strode out of the room, closing the door gently behind her.

Lily decided to do as her mother-in-law bade her, and lay down under a soft comforter and slept.

* * *

Grant came in the back door to the house, shrugged off his coat, and hung it up on a peg like he used to do when he was a young man living at home. Home. Yes, this was home, but he much preferred the home he had built with Lily. Love was in both places, and it was the people who made it so.

He came up the back stairs and found his father in the library, sitting at his desk. "Good afternoon, Father," he said as he stood in the doorway.

"Grant." His father rose and walked across the room and gave his son a bear hug. "We missed you. Your mother and I eagerly anticipated your arrival. She's visited with Lily, and the kids are being cared for." He motioned for his son to come into the room and closed the door behind him. "Come, sit by the fire."

Grant followed his father across the room to sit down and warm himself. Having driven all day in the winter's cold, he was chilled to the bone.

"Shall I call for some tea or would you like some brandy?"

"I gave up drinking years ago, Father," Grant reminded him.

"Hmmm, yes. I'll ring for tea then." He pulled the bell and came to sit by his son. "We were heartbroken to hear of Grant Junior's death. How are you and Lily faring? I haven't met the children yet, but, well son, I'm just worried about you. We've been praying."

"Thanks, Father." Grant clasped his hands together and his head fell forward. "Some days I feel like I am the most blessed man in the world, and then others…when I see the hurt and anguish there in Lily's eyes, I feel like I've failed her somehow. She cares for Tobin, and sometimes I witness the smiles, her trying to love him even though no one could replace our son, and yet she hurts so badly. I want to take it away and I can't."

"What happened was by God's choice, son. You could do nothing to stop it. But how you can glorify Him when you are in pain like this, is the greater test."

"I understand that in my head, but my heart is sometimes much slower to understand."

"You will. Give it time."

Grant grimaced and nodded. "You are right, Father."

They sat in silence for some time.

“Is Garrett going to be here tomorrow?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Some distant clan of the O’Neill’s is trying to gain custody of the children.”

“I thought the adoption papers were signed?”

“They were. Garrett helped me, and it went quickly. He said law is on our side, but there isn’t a whole lot of ‘law’ down in our neck of the woods. I never told Lily about the telegrams. But they can’t take Tobin. He needs a mother’s milk. He would die if they tried to transport him to Kansas City. It would kill Lily to lose the children. She doesn’t realize how she has blossomed as a mother to them.”

“And you wouldn’t miss them?”

Grant leaned back in the chair, thrusting his legs straight out and crossing them at the ankles as his head fell back. “I would be devastated.”

“What kind of threat are they making?”

“They wanted us to send the kids to them. I refused. They said they were coming on the fifteenth to collect the children. I didn’t respond.”

“Because you planned to be here.”

Grant nodded. “If I need to go back alone, I will. I cannot put them at risk, but if I have to fight for my family, I will.”

Harold stared at his son, admiration shining in his eyes. “You are a good man, Grant. God is with you, and will guide you. Your family is welcome here for however long you desire. You realize I would not mind if you decided to move back and help with the family business.”

“I know. But I’m a man of the land. I’m not one for keeping the books. I did well enough with the little bit I made, but to be honest, Lily deserves better at that. You understand I needed to make my own way.”

“Yes, Grant, and I admire you for it. We just miss you, being so far away.”

“I didn’t seek my fortune in Colorado or California. We’re only a day’s drive southeast.”

“But it’s been two years since we’ve seen you. It was your wedding day.”

Grant smiled. “I struck gold there, didn’t I?”

“I think you did.”

“Speaking of which, I should go check on Lily. She’s been looking tired lately. I’m hoping she can rest a bit while we are here and regain some of that spark she had lost.”

“We’ll do all we can to help bring that back, Grant.”

The two men stood, the elder patting his hand on the younger but taller man’s shoulder. “Go to your wife. We’ll see you all at dinner.”

“Thanks.”

* * *

Grant opened the bedroom door quietly. His wife slept under the counterpane, and yet she still wore an expression of worry on her face. He walked over, picked up a chair close by, and moved it close to the bed and sat down. He slowly lifted the stray hairs that always seemed to fall in her face when she slept no matter if she had braided her hair or tied it back. He smiled. He loved pushing that hair off her face. He thought he would still love it when she was much older and the now dark hairs would be white with age. His thumb gently touched between her eyes where the skin seemed wrinkled together in worry. He tried to smooth that away as well.

Slowly, her eyes opened. She saw him and smiled, yawned, and stretched. More hair fell over her face.

He grinned.

“What was that for?” she asked.

“You. You make me smile. You are so beautiful.”

“Surely with my wrinkled clothes and messed up hair…”

He pushed some hair away again, “Makes you more desirable to me than you will ever realize. I never did get that tea my father had requested. I forgot about it in my desire to see how you were doing.”

“Your mother instructed me to rest.”

“Well then, we must obey mother’s orders.” Grant stood and took off his suit coat and pulled off his boots.

Lily propped herself up on one elbow and one eyebrow was raised.

Grant smiled at her and winked. “I need rest too, don’t I?” He joined her under the covers. “I love you, Lily,” he whispered and held his bride close as they both drifted to asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next day, the house was filled with family as Grant's brothers and sisters descended with their collective broods. Colleen and Simon were quickly absorbed into the ensuing chaos as the children began games of hide and seek around the large home.

Grant managed to secret himself away with his brother, Garrett.

"I think you are worried about nothing, Grant." Garrett sat back in his seat, observing his brother pacing.

"There is a threat. What would keep them from attempting to take the children by force?" Grant's voice was soft but tinged with anxiety. "They don't seem to be daunted by my attempts to fob them off. This is not the big city. This is rural countryside with few witnesses and very little law presence."

"So what do you want to do? Legally, we've done all we can."

"I want to go back and meet them."

Garrett sat up straight, eyes bright. "When?"

"Tomorrow. If I left tomorrow, I could be home a day before they arrive. I have enough ammunition. I could perhaps persuade them to the truth."

Garrett laughed. "Well, yes, you with a gun can be persuasive. If you are not careful, you could get yourself killed or hauled away for murder."

"It's not murder if I'm acting in self-defence."

"I will go with you."

"*Now* you believe the threat is bigger than paper?" Grant stood in one place, staring at his brother.

Garrett rose and came to stand in front of Grant. The two brothers were of a similar size and had often been mistaken for twins in their youth. Garrett now presented himself in fine clothing and close cut hair and shave, making Grant appear like a hick in comparison.

Garrett cleared his throat. "I never doubted you. I only wanted to see how far you wanted to take this. You've always been the peacemaker, the one who would avoid a conflict if he could. I assumed your coming home was an attempt to do that. But adopting these kids and caring for them, and now standing up for them…well, I think I admire you more than ever. I would be honored to stand by your side to defend your family."

"What will Belinda say?" Grant asked.

Garrett shrugged. "She'll kiss me and wish me well on our adventure. I've had to take business trips before, and she's survived just fine. She won't mind if I'm gone for a few days. How about Lily? You two have never been apart before?"

Grant frowned. "I hate leaving her, but I want her safe and cared

for, and who better to do that than Mother?"

"Mother is in heaven with a houseful like this."

"Lily doesn't know about the telegrams."

"Why?"

"I didn't want to worry her. She still grieves our son. She didn't want to take on the kids, but she gave in to my plea on that. She's never once complained, and the children adore her. While Tobin is not our biological son and no one could replace the child we lost, I believe she has come to love him. I didn't want to threaten that fragile peace."

"See, I was right."

"You were? About what?"

"You being the peacemaker. Sounds like you may need to disturb a little bit of that temporarily in order to win it absolutely."

"How did my younger brother get to be so wise?" Grant smiled and shoved his brother's shoulder with his own as they headed for the door.

"I think I learned it from you, big brother." Garrett shoved Grant back. The two laughed and exited the room.

"Guess I better go talk with Lily. Will you be ready to leave at eight? I'd like to ride on horseback to make better time."

"Eight it is." Garrett patted his brother on the shoulder as Grant started up the stairs and Garrett wandered down to another room to find his own wife.

* * *

Lily was sitting by the fireplace with Jack at her feet. Tobin was nestled in her arms, sound asleep. Grant closed the door softly and crossed to where she sat and placed a kiss on the top of her head.

"The house is in an uproar now that the family has all arrived. You were wise to seek refuge here."

Lily glanced up at her husband, "It was delightful to see everyone again, Grant, but having only met them once before, they still seem like strangers to me. The kids are happy, but I am a little lost, so I came here."

Grant frowned. "I'm sorry, Lily. It never dawned on me that my family wouldn't feel as comfortable to you as it would to me."

"They are wonderful, Grant. Every one of them has been so gracious and treated me as if I've been around them for years. But then they start sharing memories and I feel…"

"Left out?"

Lily nodded. "I'm glad we came. I will get some rest, and the kids get playmates and there is less time to remember…" Her smile dropped.

"It's okay to live your life, Lily. Little Grant is not going to despise you for not thinking of him every moment. If you do, then you are in

danger of making him an idol."

Lily nodded and rose to put Tobin in the bassinet. "I know, Grant. Thank you for giving me permission to live. Thank you for forcing these children on me, too. Having them to care for has been a good thing. Even Tobin. He's such a sweet little boy." She caressed the infant's cheek lightly, and then with a sigh, turned to go back to her husband. "Did you come here for anything in particular?"

"You know me too well." Grant took his wife over to a loveseat and sat her down next to him, keeping his hands over hers as they sat angled towards each other. He explained the telegraphs briefly and his plan to go back home with Garrett for a few days.

"But the adoption is legal." Lily's eyes were wide.

"True, but they still might try. I'm not sure why they are so persistent, but I want this settled once and for all. I don't want to wonder when or what they will try next."

Lily studied her husband's face for a few moments. "I always knew you to be an honorable man. I thought so from the day I first saw you jumping into the bull ring to rescue one of your competitors. Everyone else was too afraid of that bull, but you not only saved Jimmy from getting trampled, you managed to help that clown escape as well and almost found yourself gored in the process. Your hat fell off your head, and I saw the glorious hair in the sunlight and it felt like God was saying, "That's the man you should marry."

"You've never told me that before. I nearly forgot about that day."

"I also remember you later winning at roping and then brazenly bringing me that rose. You never said a word, but your eyes spoke volumes to my heart."

"I still can't believe you chose me over Richard, though. He has a far greater earning capacity and his business is secure. You could have had a far more comfortable life with him."

Lily smiled. "I really couldn't imagine being married to the area's undertaker. I felt that if God led me to you, then He would make it all work out, somehow. I've never regretted the decision."

"I feel bad about leaving you here for a few days."

Lily glanced down at her hands enveloped in his. "It will force me to engage more when I can't hide behind you. Your sisters are surely not going let me spend much time in our room if you are not here with me. They seem to think we are still newlyweds." Lily blushed.

Grant smiled broadly and lifted a hand up to push a few hairs away that had once again fallen in her face. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "I hope we will always be that, sweetheart." He kissed her. "We are alone, and I'm going to be away from you for three whole days. Do you think, maybe...?"

Lily lifted her hands to caress his face on both sides and leaned up

for a kiss. “I’ll make you wish you had never left me for even an hour.”

CHAPTER NINE

The journey back to Hillsboro was uneventful. There was a light snowfall, but the temperatures stayed mild. Once back at the cottage, Grant checked the cattle and spoke with the hired hand that stopped by to milk the cows and take care of the feeding.

Garrett had managed to get some coffee made by the time Grant returned to the house. “Pretty rough living here compared to back at home, brother.”

Grant shrugged. “It suits us.”

“You could have been so much more.”

Grant turned to touch his brother’s arm. “More than what?”

“More than”—he scanned the room—“this.”

“I am more than this. I am a servant of God, and He called me here for some reason. I’m not meant for suits and ties. I’m a man of the land. I work with my hands. I love the wide open spaces, the bluffs, the trees, seeing God’s glory in the sunrise and His power in the storms. This, dear brother, is who I am.”

Garrett grinned. “I know.” He walked over to sit by the fire. “I guess part of me is jealous.”

“Why would you be jealous of a life you disdain?”

“It’s not a life for me, but I do not disdain it for you.” He sipped some of the coffee. “I’m jealous of the confidence you have in God’s call on your life. I’ve never experienced that kind of certainty. Sometimes, as I work, I wonder. Am I really making a difference for the kingdom?”

“You helped three orphaned children become a part of a Christian home.”

“That’s nothing. You are the one who took them in and sacrificially provide for them.”

Grant was silent as he considered his brother. “Do you doubt your salvation?”

Garrett shook his head. “No. I pray and I read the Bible and I try to do what it says. Not an easy thing when in the line of work I am in.” He chuckled. “But I never heard God specifically tell me to do anything. I ask. I plead. I get nothing.”

“God rarely speaks to me, Garrett, other than to tell me things in His word. Sometimes, it’s an impression I get deep inside. A conviction of what I need to do. I pray and often find that He forces me to take risks I would never take on my own.”

“I guess that makes sense. You always were more of a Momma’s boy. I was surprised that you would be the one to travel so far from home. Father wanted you in the family business, working at running the mill. But as good as you were with numbers, you would have

nothing to do with it."

"Getting good grades in school is not akin to loving working with numbers."

"Then there was Lorna."

Grant groaned and closed his eyes. "Please, let's not go there."

"No, let's. If you had married her, you would have been set for life. You could give money right and left to the church and missionaries. But for some reason, you stopped your courtship of her and up and decided to head southeast on an adventure."

"I had prayed about Lorna. I really did like her, and she was pretty, but there was no peace in my spirit about spending the rest of my life with her. I was not meant to be a society fixture. My future with her felt—bleak." Grant sighed. "She pressured me to propose, and I bolted. Probably the most cowardly thing I've ever done. I saddled my horse and rode like the wind. I didn't know where I was going, but asked the Lord to lead me. This is where I ended up. Right on this spot of land. I camped here across from that big bluff and felt like God was telling me this was home."

"I wonder what would have happened if I'd explored beyond our little county."

"You might still have become a lawyer."

"Perhaps."

"How about we cook up some grub and hit the sack. Who knows what tomorrow holds for us?"

"You even learned to cook out here?"

"You'd be surprised the things I've learned since coming here. I will confess, though, that Lily makes a much better meal than I ever could."

The next morning, Garrett joined Grant in the barn to do the chores and to try his hand at farming. Both men were armed.

After completing the work, Garret and Grant sat down to a simple lunch. Before they were finished, the sound of horses' hooves warned them someone was coming up the path.

"Well, it seems our company has arrived at last." Garrett wiped his mouth on his sleeve and tapped his gun in the holster as he rose.

"You seem a bit more eager for action than I am, but let's get this settled." Grant stood and grabbed his coat and hat. He headed for the door with Garrett on his heels.

They were both standing in front of the house with their arms crossed as the three horses pulled up. Two were pulling a carriage, and Sheriff Banks rode the other.

"Good day, gentlemen," said the sheriff as he dismounted. "Fine weather for December." He ambled up to stand before Grant.

"Hello, Sheriff. Good day to you as well. May I introduce my

brother, Garrett Anderson, Attorney at Law."

"Pleased to meet you."

Garrett shook his hand. "Pleasure to meet one of the fine men who do their best to help make sure the laws are upheld."

Sheriff Banks nodded his head and cleared his throat as two men strode up from the carriage.

"Mr. Grant Anderson and Mr. Garrett Anderson, it seems that these fine gentleman from Kansas City came for something they claim to be theirs."

The two gentlemen strode forward. "I'm Mr. Tiddle, and this is my client, Mr. O'Neill. We are here for the children."

"The children?" Garrett asked softly.

"Yes, the O'Neill children. The ones left orphaned almost two months past now," Mr. O'Neill spoke up. "They are my kin."

Grant remained silent as all eyes focused on him. His face revealed nothing.

"O'Neill children? Garrett, when inquiries were made, was there any will to be found or any documents that would lead you to believe that anyone had claim to any O'Neill children?"

"No. There was no provision made for the children, and there was some question as to the authenticity of the marriage itself as it could not be verified."

"Really?" Grant was surprised. "Interesting. So the O'Neill children may not be O'Neills?"

"Correct. They may be Harris children, but no family from that branch of the tree was willing to come forward to claim them." Garrett folded his arms.

"Could we go inside to discuss this?" asked the sheriff.

"Sorry for my poor hospitality, but we didn't clean up from our lunch yet, and the house is in a bit of a mess an' all with the wife gone."

"Mrs. Anderson is not here?" The sheriff frowned. "How disappointing. Your wife bakes the best pies in these here parts." He rubbed his belly.

"Thank you, Sheriff, I will be happy to pass along your compliment," Grant said with a grin. "I'm kind of partial to her pies myself." He patted his flat stomach.

"Where are the children? Enough stalling. It's cold out here." Mr. O'Neill spoke in clipped tones.

"*My* children are with my wife and family." Grant's tone was edged with steel.

"We told you we were coming for the children. You were to hand them over," Mr. Tiddle said.

"I telegraphed you that the children were legally adopted and not

at your disposal. You wasted your time traveling here."

"My paperwork says otherwise." Mr. Banks pulled out some papers and waved them in the air. Before they could go much further, Garrett grabbed them.

"Hey!" yelped Mr. Banks. "Those are not yours."

"Legal papers are in my province, Mr. Banks, as I represent Mr. Anderson and his family in this matter." Garrett opened up the papers and began to skim the contents. Mr. Tiddle and Mr. O'Neill fidgeted and gave each other nervous glances. Grant was on the alert.

"Sheriff, we expect you to do what's right here," Mr. O'Neill said.

"Listen here." Sheriff Banks turned slowly to face the two gentlemen. "Mr. Anderson is a well-respected citizen of this community. If they hadn't taken in those children, that baby would be dead, for sure. They are in a much better place now than they were when the O'Neills were alive." He bent his head and crossed his heart. "God rest their souls." He looked up again. "What are you going to do to provide for those children? I didn't see you bringing a nanny and wet nurse with you to collect them."

"Wet nurse?" Mr. O'Neill took a small step back. "Why would we need a wet nurse? The children are old enough not to need one."

The Sheriff nodded his head and smiled. "So how many children were you planning to collect Mr. O'Neill?"

"Two. The girl and boy, although really, all we want is the boy. He is the heir to the estate."

Grant snorted. "Heir? To what? The O'Neills lived in fetid squalor. The children were beaten and unwanted, and Mr. O'Neill was notorious for his drinking habits. He had no money. And, for your information, there are three children. Can you name them if you are such close kin?"

Garrett glanced up from the papers. "Good point there, Mr. Anderson. Can you name the children?"

Mr. O'Neill fidgeted as he put his hands up to his mouth to blow warmth on them, the steam rising out of his mouth as he did so in the cool December air. "Let me see, the girl, she would be Bridget, after her mother, and the boy would be Daniel, after his father. You are bluffing about the third child." The man smiled as if he believed he had passed the test.

Grant shook his head. The sheriff stared incredulously at Mr. O'Neill, "I think you came a long way for nothing. There hasn't been any Daniel and Bridget O'Neill in these parts that I'm aware of.

"The baby, Mr. O'Neill, was it a boy or girl, and what did they name it?" Grant asked. Mr. O'Neill started rocking on his heels, and his hands slowly moved down to his side.

"Enough of this. I came for the children, and I want them now." He

pulled a gun out of his coat and pointed it at Grant's face, and bringing up his other hand to hold it steady, he cocked it. The silver pistol glistened as the sun hit it, a thing of stark beauty.

For what seemed a long time, no one moved. "Don't be foolish, Mr. O'Neill. The children are not the ones you seek, and they are no longer O'Neills. You are not prepared to care for them, even if they were." Garrett's voice was soft and low, as if he were cajoling a toddler.

The gun wavered as the man glanced at Garrett. O'Neill's eyes narrowed.

"Mr. O'Neill." This time, it was Grant who stood unflinchingly, staring down the barrel of the gun. "As I see it, there are two choices here. One. You shoot me. You gain nothing more than a murder charge and time in prison. Two. You walk away from here and never bother my family again, and I will not press charges against you for attempted kidnapping, attempted murder and trespassing."

"I am not trespassing."

"I believe you are. I specifically told you your errand was wasted, and you persist in badgering me for children that are in no way yours."

The gun lowered slowly. The sheriff grabbed the weapon and emptied it of its rounds.

Garrett handed the papers back to Mr. O'Neill. "I wish you God's blessing in your search for your family, but you are on a fruitless errand in coming here. If you have any further questions, Mr. Tiddle, you can reach me at this address." He handed Mr. Tiddle a business card.

"I would say thank you for your visit today," Grant ground out, "but for some reason I'm not feeling much gratitude. I will ask you now to leave of my property. However, should you try to return, I will consider you a trespasser and shoot to kill, as is within my rights." Grant's right hand went to pull aside his jacket and reveal the holster on his own hip, and he laid his hand lightly on the gun. As if in a mirror, Garrett did the same with his left hand, the two men standing side by side, tall and strong, and appearing more and more like the twins they weren't.

"I suggest we leave, Mr. O'Neill, and return to Kansas City to resume our search for your family from there. We've obviously been in error."

Mr. O'Neill turned on his attorney. "We? You are the one in error. Don't think I'll be paying you for this." The harangue went on as the two made their way back to the carriage.

"I'm grateful we avoided any bloodshed here," Sheriff Banks said. "I'll be making sure they catch their train south." He tipped his hat.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Anderson. Grant, give my regards to your lovely wife and your family. Blessed Christmas to you all.”

“Thank you, Sheriff. Blessed Christmas to you as well.” Grant stood with his hand still on his holster as the wagon turned in the yard and headed down the path. Mr. O’Neill glared at him, and noting that the men both had their guns at hand, he turned to focus on the dirt road before him. The sheriff mounted and followed the wagon down the path to the main road.

When the wagon was no longer in sight, both men let their hands drop. Grant raised his hand to cover his face, sliding it down from his forehead to his beard before letting his arm descend to his side.

Garrett watched him. “Well done, brother. Always the peacemaker. We made it without bloodshed.”

CHAPTER TEN

They turned to go inside and reheated the coffee.

"I would have gladly killed him, Garrett. I didn't realize such darkness was in me."

"Only natural, given the threat. I'm not sure I would have reacted any differently if a gun were pointed at my face. All I could think in that moment was how would I tell Lily you were gone."

Grant let out a humph. "Nice to hear you held such confidence in my survival skills."

"Face it, Grant, he was nervous, and that was a pretty impressive pistol."

"And if God wanted me dead, I would be and thrilled to be in His presence."

"But…? "

"I would hate to see Lily suffer with me gone. I've provided well for her, and she's young and would remarry eventually." His fist clenched at the thought of any other man having his wife.

"Is that what you did with your inheritance? Set it up for her in case something happened to you?"

"Of course I did."

"Does she know about this?"

"No. I've never told her. There are a few fights between us, and I don't want to give her motivation for seeing me dead should we have a big row." Grant smiled at his brother and they both laughed.

"I cannot imagine your Lily ever raging at you, Grant. Now my Belinda? Whooo doggie, that girl can fight!" Garrett smiled and shook his head. "Ah, it's worth it, though, for the way she makes up when it's over!" Both men laughed but soon sobered.

"Do you think they'll be back?" Grant asked.

"If they are smart, they won't."

"What was in the papers?"

"Seems the O'Neill children are due an inheritance, but through the firstborn male."

"Just not these O'Neill children."

"Oh, it was for these *former* O'Neill children."

"But I thought it was for Daniel and Bridget O'Neill's children?"

"You didn't know the O'Neills well I take it?"

"No. I passed them once or twice in town, but they lived farther afield."

"The parents of your children were Daniel, better known as "Butch" O'Neill, and Bridget 'Gigi' Harris. They never legally married, probably why they didn't attend church. Legally, Mr. O'Neill never claimed the children as his. Their birth records burned, so there is no

proof of his parentage. You even said that the infant was unnamed because Mr. O'Neill wasn't even sure it was really his."

"So a technicality protects us?"

"God has already punished them for their sins, but has blessed you for your faithfulness in providing your instant family on the eve of your own loss. Those children realize how much better off they are."

Grant smiled. "Simon started calling me Pa within two days of coming here. Colleen has been Lily's shadow, so eager to learn and help." Tears came to his eyes, "Tobin has red hair like our son did. Every time I look at him, I remember..." Grant covered his eyes with his hand and let the tears flow. Garrett waited in silence.

"You've never cried for your son before?"

Grant dragged a handkerchief and wiped his face, his blue eyes reflecting the firelight and his misery. "Lily was so devastated. I was more worried I would lose her. I couldn't imagine my life without her, Garrett." He shook his head. "Our son was perfect. So tiny, but perfect. Red hair like me. Ten fingers and toes. So tiny." He sipped his coffee. "I was powerless to help her. I couldn't fix it, make it better. I wonder if I had done something different, maybe the baby wouldn't have died."

"Babies die all the time. Sometimes before they are born, more often after. It's a sad part of life."

"I understand that, but I felt like I wasn't doing all God wanted me to do here. I wasn't reaching out enough to my neighbors, to share with them about Jesus. So many of them are lost in meaningless religion. Was I too quiet about my faith? Did I fail to serve those outside my church? I feared God was telling me I had failed."

Garrett put a hand on Grant's shoulder. "If anyone has failed God, brother, it's been me. I go days without seeking His counsel. I give lip service to my faith, and I know I don't love Belinda as well as I should, and sometimes, I don't even want to try. I want to be more like you, Grant. I may not know the Lord as well as you. I may not hear His voice. But I do know something. He has a greater plan. Your son is in the hands of our Savior. Free from a sinful world. Your loss provided a loving home for three children who had never known love before and would have died. If they had survived, they would have become pawns for cash to be exchanged and left destitute in the long run. Three little people get the blessing of being raised by the godliest people I know. You may lack wealth and riches, a fancy house, and fine clothes like the rest of us. But sometimes, brother, I think you are the wealthiest of us all."

Grant whispered, "Thank you." He set down his coffee cup, rose, and stretched. "I think I need to go take a walk."

"Mind if I come with you?"

“I appreciate the offer, but I need to spend a bit of time alone with God. In the meantime, why don’t you scrounge up something for dinner? We’ll hit the sack early and leave before the sunrise. I’m eager to see Lily.”

Garrett smiled. “Go for your walk, and I’ll show you that this city boy is not without some culinary skills.”

Grant left the house and strode purposefully across the furrowed field to where the treeline began that marked the rocky terrain of the bluff that had first drawn him to the area. He entered the trees and began to climb the rocks that emerged between the trees and the dirt. Little snow made it to the ground here with many pine trees blocking the path to the ground. It was dark and silent. Grant continued to climb. Vapor materialized in front of him in the cold winter air. Reaching the top of the hill, he found his favorite spot for thinking and sat down. There were fewer trees and it was exposed, so he had a view of his farm and the surrounding countryside. His heart pounded from the exertion of the climb. A red-tailed hawk swooped down to catch his prey. He spied a bobcat prowling further below as well. A few birds could be heard, but mostly, it was the peace and quiet that drew him here and the grandeur of the sight before him. Even with barren fields covered in snow and farmhouses whose life was evident only from the smoke coming from the chimneys, he knew with certainty in his spirit that this was where God wanted him to be.

He lifted his head to the sky and began a silent prayer of thanks to God for today’s deliverance. He smiled at his brother’s assistance. Had they been wrong to let a technicality help end the matter? But if the kids had never been truly recognized by Butch O’Neill, then the claim was tenuous anyway. Grant shook his head. The matter was settled when they adopted the children. There was no more debating on what was fair or right. They were his. Grant smiled, and the tears came again, over what they had lost and all they had gained. He has so much to be thankful to God for.

When his toes were numb, he decided that he had been outside long enough. His cheeks burned from the air, and Lily would be chiding him for not using the lotion she specifically made for him to keep the chapping on his cheeks, lips and nose to a minimum. He grinned. He liked her fussing over him. He rose and brushed the dirt off his pants, wiggled his fingers and began his descent. Tomorrow, he would be with his family again. His little quiver-full of children and his beautiful bride. In a week or so, they would be returning home, and in his heart, he was deeply content. Yes. God had been good.

* * *

Lily grew lonely with Grant gone. She forced herself to mingle with the family. With three sisters and two brothers, Grant grew up in

a lively home. She found herself smiling often at the family interactions and the love that lay underneath the teasing. Grant's sisters, Grace, Mercy, and Hope, all delighted in telling tales of their older brother's exploits as a young man. She could tell their admiration of him as well as they also shared stories of how he would help them, protect them and teach them about God. It seemed he had been a bit of a pastor even as a youngster.

Mrs. Anderson doted on the children, and they were quickly absorbed into the passel of grandchildren running around. Colleen was learning more about ways to do her hair and tricks for teasing her brother, and Simon was coming out of his shell. She had never heard him giggle so much.

At night, the children would gather with Lily in their room, and she would pray with them. Grant usually did this, but in his absence, she led the time together.

Tonight, Colleen started. "God, please bless Papa and bring him back to us. We miss him. Keep him safe. Thank you for all our new family and for loving us so much you would give us our Ma and Pa. We really do love our new life and getting to learn about you. Bless Mama and Simon, even though he did play a mean trick on me today. Help Tobin get over his cough. Thank you, Jesus. Amen."

Simon took his turn. "Bless papa. I miss him. He plays with me and tickles me. I like his beard. Bless ma. She is smiling more and I like that. Bless Sissy, even though she's a girl. Bless Tobin and help him not to cry so much. I don't like crying. Thank you for our family and for your birthday. I love you, Jesus. Amen."

Lily couldn't help but smile and give a few tickles herself to the children as she snuggled them into bed with hugs and kisses.

Tobin had been coughing, and it alarmed her. What if she lost another baby? *Lord, please not Tobin too.* She longed for Grant's solid strength by her side through the night. She knew she was safe in this home and that God watched over them both, but she found herself on her own knees through much of the night, praying. Praying for her husband and praying for Tobin. And if she were honest, praying for herself, her fears and her grief. All laid before the throne of a Savior who saves tears and is compassionate and merciful.

* * *

The next morning, Tobin was hot and lethargic. Gertrude called in a doctor to care for the gravely ill little boy. The physician shook his head. He had no name for what ailed the infant and said only that he should be kept separate from the other children in case it would spread and that she should try to cool him off and keep him comfortable.

Gertrude and Lily took turns with the baby while the other

children played elsewhere. Damp cloths. Cool baths. Lily tried to nurse, but he hardly drank.

By late afternoon, the child slept, and Mrs. Anderson and Lily sat together, watching him.

"I'm sorry you are missing so much of your family to be with me. You really don't have to do that, Mother."

Mrs. Anderson smiled. "Servants could do this. I want to. I want to get acquainted with the woman who captivated my son's heart and makes him content. It's not enough to sit and share tea with you, Lily. Our time together is so short. But to be by your side, to serve you, to sit and talk like this without others around. I have longed for this. So my actions really are selfish."

Lily smiled. "You left pretty big shoes to fill in the example you set for loving a husband and a family. I'm grateful for the time with you to learn how to do that better for the family God has given us."

Gertrude removed her hand. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question? Never mind. I'm going to ask it anyway, because it's been something I've wanted to know since my son first informed me that you had not been raised Protestant." Lily folded her hands on her lap and waited.

"How did you ever come to know Jesus?"

Lily smiled. "I think I always knew Him. I was drawn to God but felt so distant. Like something beautiful, but untouchable. He was drawing me to Him like James writes about. But it seemed that as much as I was drawn to Him, Jesus wasn't drawing near to me. I found it frustrating. I prayed. I took walks and pleaded with God. I took our dusty family Bible and secreted it in my room and read it. I started at the beginning, in Genesis. It seemed to take me forever. And then one day, I was overcome with despair over my sin and what it had done to Jesus. I already knew I wasn't good. My mother told me that often enough. I knew I wasn't loveable. My father was distant and didn't even seem to care. So why would God?

"I cried for days. My heart was so heavy, and I read and read and read. Then one day, I understood. I was a sinner, but God loved me anyway. He knew none of us could ever be good enough, but I was loved enough for Him to take my sin and wash it away. I couldn't believe the joy that flooded my heart when I realized that. I felt like somehow, I was able to crawl up into the lap of God and receive His love." Tears glistened on her eyelashes. "My family didn't understand my joy. I tried to explain. I met with the priest and was told not to read the Bible. Then in school, I met a gal who was different. She didn't go to our church. So I talked to her. She prayed with me, encouraged me, and gave me a Bible that I hid under my pillow. It was the only way I ever disobeyed my parents. I read and read and

read. She and I would meet at lunch and talk about what I learned.

Soon, I had reached an age where it was time to find a husband and start a family of my own. Lots of the boys from our church wanted to court me, and my parents approved of every one of them. I was miserable. I kept praying that God would lead me to the right man. A man who loved God first." Lily smiled. "Then your son rode into town and bought land, and I started to see him everywhere. He glowed. He won everyone as his friend, even some of my eager suitors. Somehow, he singled me out. I think I was in love with him from the first time I looked in his eyes. I just knew. My parents were furious. They refused my dowry and threatened to disown me if I walked away from our religion to marry him. We really didn't get to know each other much before our marriage because of my parent's opposition. But I'm grateful for the way God led us together. Grant was more than I ever hoped for in a husband." Lily blushed.

Mrs. Anderson wiped away a tear. "I never doubted your faith, Lily, or your love for my son. I just always wondered how a Catholic girl came to be married to him and how God could create her to be such a perfect helpmate. Thank you for sharing your story, my dear. Now why don't you lie down, and I'll keep watch over our little Tobin? It wouldn't do for you to get sick as well."

"Thank you." Lily rose and walked over to her mother-in-law and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lily awoke in a sweat. She was surprised to see Grant sitting by her side on the bed, placing a wet cloth on her forehead. He smiled down on her.

"Welcome back, sweetheart. You've been sleeping for quite a while."

Lily tried to rise but grew dizzy. Grant's hand gently pushed her back into her damp pillow. He pushed hair off her face. "Tobin," she mouthed. Her throat was on fire.

"He's still with us. Mother is caring for him. The doctor thinks he will most likely live to cause us grey hairs. Let me help you drink some water." He placed one hand behind her upper back to lift her up and brought a glass to her lips. She slipped back into sleep with him holding her hand.

* * *

Grant had been exhausted after the journey back to LaCrosse and was dismayed to find his wife sick with the fever, and their infant also struggling to survive. He let Garrett share the good news with the rest of the family about what had happened back at the farm while he kept vigil by his wife's bed. His mother managed to find some goats' milk and manufacture a way to feed the baby who was recovering but still weak. He left Lily's side reluctantly to put the children to bed and listen to their prayers.

"Pa, is Mama going to be well soon?" Colleen asked.

"I pray so." He patted her red hair gently.

"Mama told me that Jesus helps us. We'll ask Him to help Ma," Simon whispered and then proceeded to kneel by his bed to pray. Colleen followed suit.

"Jesus, thank you that Papa is here with us again. Help Ma get better so we can all enjoy your birthday. Amen." Simon still held his hands together as he waited for his sister.

"Dear Jesus. Papa's home and that makes us happy. We miss Mama and she's really sick, but you already know that. Please help Mama get better so she can take care of us. Thank you for our new family and the fun with our aunts and uncles, but we really love Papa and Mama best and want to be able to see her and give her hugs. Thank you, Jesus. Amen."

Grant hugged his children close. *His*. These children were his. They had wormed their way into his heart and depended on him. Ultimately, they belonged to God, but he was glad they unwittingly offered him comfort as he struggled with fear over his wife's health. He tucked them into bed and gave them each kisses and a few tickles with his beard. He returned to the room he shared with his wife. He

grabbed for his Bible and sat by the side of the bed to read, eventually falling to his knees to pray, laying hands on his bride. When he finished, he stayed there, listening to her raspy breath and feeling her steady pulse through her tiny wrist. *Steady. Breathe, sweetheart. Keep breathing.* And He waited to see if God would speak into the silence or act in some way on his behalf.

He could sense fear at the edge of his emotions, and in his mind, drew a sword to slice away at the offender. He grew sweaty with the effort as he wrestled within himself for peace. When he finished, he felt like he had engaged in a real battle for his wife's life. His pulse was rapid and he was warm. He rose, gave his wife a kiss, and then stripped to wash himself before putting on his nightshirt. He crawled into bed and pulled his wife close, taking note of the fact that she was much cooler. The fever had broken. Thanking God, he fell into a well-deserved rest.

* * *

The following morning, Lily was able to eat a little bit of oatmeal and an egg. She asked for Tobin, and the infant was brought to her. She nursed him and then returned him to the care of her mother-in-law so she could rest and regain her strength.

The next day, Lily could speak again as her throat was no longer raw. She snuggled up to her husband as he slept and kissed his cheek, his beard and then down to his neck where he was ticklish. His shoulder came up to try to protect from further attack, but a smile crossed his face even as his eyes remained closed. "My wife must be better."

"That I am. Mostly due to your kind ministrations on my behalf," she whispered and then kissed his collarbone, having unbuttoned the top of his shirt with one hand and pushed the fabric aside.

"Beware, wife."

"Beware of what? The big bad wolf?"

"I'm going to huff and puff and..." Grant followed that up with a kiss.

* * *

The entire Anderson clan celebrated Christmas the next day. The children helped decorate the tree, and a huge yule log was in the fireplace. Lily was still weak and was being pampered by everyone, and Tobin was once again snuggled in her arms. She hadn't realized how much a part of her he was until she had been sick. Grant sat by her side on the loveseat, taking up most of the space, but she didn't mind as she leaned against him, finding warmth in the comfort of his presence.

Grandpapa Anderson, as the children had taken to calling him, was gathering the little ones around him for the reading of Christmas

story. The smell of apples and cinnamon filled the air, and candles gave the room a soft glow.

"Go, children. Grandpapa wants you close as he tells the story of Jesus." Lily pushed Colleen forward.

"I don't want to leave you, Mama," the little girl whimpered. She was dressed in a pretty blue dress trimmed with white lace, and her hair was pulled back into a riot of curls that cascaded down her back.

Simon wore a smart little suit and breeches and a bow tie. He too had been hovering around Lily. "I'll stay with you, Mama."

Grant tousled the little boy's dark curls and then held the head and forced his son to look at him. "Go. Trust me to take care of your mama."

"Yes, Papa," they said in unison as they tentatively approached their cousins and found a spot on the floor near Grandpapa.

Grandpapa opened up the Bible and began to read from Luke, chapter two. The children sat mesmerized as he told about Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem and not able to find a place to sleep.

"I know what that's like," Colleen piped up.

"You do?" Grandpapa asked patiently.

"When our house burned down, we had no place to sleep. People fought over who would take us and finally, Simon, Tobin and I ended up sleeping in a cold barn. It wasn't until Ma and Pa came for us and took us home that we were safe and warm."

"They had room for us," Simon said.

"I'm glad they did, because I got you for my grandchildren. Shall we see what happened next?" Grandpapa Anderson said. The children all nodded.

Grandpapa read about the baby being born in a barn and angels appearing to shepherds and them coming to visit the baby. He then read about the wise men coming as well to worship Jesus and bring him gifts.

"That's why we celebrate Jesus's birthday by giving gifts to each other, because He lives in us when we accept his invitation to be His children. Giving a gift to someone is like giving a gift to God. But God gave us the greatest gift in His son, Jesus, when he died on the cross for our sin. Have any of you ever sinned?"

All the little hands went up in the air. Grandpapa nodded and the adults chuckled. "I thought so. No one can do good all the time, no matter how hard we try. But when we try to honor God and obey our parents, then God is pleased with us. When we worship Him, live for Jesus, and do what He tells us to do in His word, Jesus is happy. How can we give Jesus a gift this Christmas or any day?"

The children were silent for a few moments. Simon rose and went to Grant and stood before him.

“Yes, son?”

Simon reached up his arms to his father and Grant pulled him up into his lap. Simon put his pudgy little hands on Grant’s beard. “I love you, Papa. Thank you for letting me be your son.” The little arms wrapped themselves around Grant’s neck.

“I love you too, son. You are definitely a gift from God to our family.”

Simon looked at Lily and leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek. “I love you, Mama. Thank you for letting us be your family.”

Tears welled up as Lily reached out a hand to touch his plump cheek. “I love you too, Simon. You are a tremendous blessing to me.”

Soon, all the children were running to their parents to share the gift of their love and gratitude. Words were exchanged as well as hugs, kisses, and many happy tears. It was a Christmas blessing remembered long after the material gifts were gone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan M. Baganz chases after three Hobbits, and is a native of Wisconsin. She is an Acquisitions Editor with Prism Book Group, specializing in bringing great romance novels and novellas to publication. Susan writes adventurous historical and contemporary romances with a biblical world-view.

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Susan speaks, teaches, and encourages others to follow God in being all He has created them to be. With her seminary degree in counseling psychology, a background in the field of mental health, and years serving in church ministry, she understands the complexities and pain of life as well as its craziness. She serves behind-the-scenes in various capacities at her church. Her favorite pastimes are lazy...snuggling with her dog while reading a good book, or sitting with a friend chatting over a cup of spiced chai latte.

You can learn more by following her blog www.susanbaganz.com, her Twitter feed @susanbaganz or her fan page, www.facebook.com/susanmbaganz.

Please enjoy this sample from *Pesto & Potholes* by Susan Baganz.

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At last, Renata had the freedom to start life over. A clean slate. The past was dead and buried. She wiped sweaty palms on her skirt as she waited for the pastor's message to end. He was talking about trusting God, even when times were hard.

She had lived that message, hadn't she? Had someone forwarded her name and informed him she would be there?

Renata shook her head as she bent in prayer along with the rest of the large congregation.

Help me to trust You on this new journey, Lord.

Renata longed to slip out and go home, but her gregarious roomie, Stephanie, had driven and now held her hostage. Steph brought her a cup of coffee as Renata hid behind a plant in the crowded café where people mingled. Renata held the cup more as a prop. It gave her hands something to do as Stephanie introduced her to friends. She shifted her weight as people gathered close, bumping into each other.

Stephanie grinned at her, and Renata smiled halfheartedly as she took a deep breath. She had just met Gabby and Paul, and their ten-month-old son, Jacob, who was sleeping on his daddy's shoulder. They were nice enough. Being that close to a baby was agony.

Just don't look at him.

Some other young men had come to join them as well. Bryan, James, and John were the names she had been told. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck under her long hair as Bryan looked her over like a horse he considered for purchase. The hardness of his eyes reminded her of… *No. Don't go there*. She was grateful nothing more was required of her other than "Hello."

Was it impolite to look at their shoes? She'd heard a person could learn a lot about someone by his shoes. Bryan wore dirty athletic shoes. High priced, but unimpressive indeed.

Dark brown dress shoes entered the circle, and Renata's gaze came up as a tall man in crisp khakis, a button-down white shirt, and no tie arrested her attention. Stephanie drew him closer to her side with a wide grin.

Was everyone here Steph's friend? Renata chuckled mentally. Her outgoing, blonde bombshell of a roommate hadn't changed much since college. Ren took in the details of this man. Tall. Muscular. Hair the color of a dark roast coffee. Deep chocolate eyes. His glance was warm and sincere. He looked...safe.

Hmmm. Isn't that something?

Her shoulders relaxed as she released a breath of air, and her heartrate slowed. She paid close attention, which was not an easy task in the noisy chaos of the café area of the church after the worship service had ended.

"Tony, I'm glad you are here. I wanted to introduce you to my roomie. Renata. This is Tony, my boss at De Luca's Cucina and Gabby's little brother"—she turned to Tony—"and this is Renata Blake, a dear friend of mine who moved here from Oshkosh."

"Glad to meet you. What'd you do in Oshkosh?" asked Tony.

Renata flinched, sucked in a breath of air, and held it.

"Let's not talk about the past. Renata is here for a new start in life." Stephanie gave Renata's arm a squeeze as she spoke.

Renata exhaled slowly and gave her friend a look of gratitude.

"I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable." Tony's voice was deep and resonant. He sounded sincere.

"Tony, the bonfire on Thursday night would be a great opportunity for Renata to get to know more people here at church." Gabby jumped in to change the subject.

Blood pounded behind Renata's eyes.

Other people planning her social life? This couldn't be good.

She shook her head. She would rather sit at home and read a book. It was too soon.

Stephanie, however, disagreed. "What a great idea, Gabby. I can't take her because I'm scheduled to work at De Luca's. Renata, you should go. It'll be fun. I'm sure Tony would pick you up."

"Hey, what about me?" said Bryan as he thumped his chest. "Am I chopped liver or what? I'll come get you, Renata." His eyes lingered overly long on her body, and Tony cleared his throat.

James and John also chimed in with offers to escort her.

"No offense, but I have known you boys *far* too long." Stephanie turned her gaze away from the trio. "It should be Tony. I can trust *him* to be a gentleman."

Renata watched as Tony glanced at the men with a grimace at the rebuff they had received. He turned his attention back to her. "If you would like to go, I'd be pleased to give you a ride and help you get acquainted." His eyebrows rose, daring her to turn him down.

A sliver of courage rose to the surface as Renata's eyes darted to Stephanie and back to her friend's handsome employer. "That would be fine. Thank you, Tony." She wondered if he even heard her as her tentative words came out softly. Her gaze dropped to her hands clenched around the cup she held.

Brian snorted and stalked off. John and James faded out of the group to join him, mumbling their goodbyes. The tension left Renata's

shoulders at their departure.

Paul smiled as he switched his sleeping son to his other shoulder. “You can rely on Tony. I may be his brother-in-law, but there’s no one I would trust more than him. His parents set a high standard for any man to follow.” He turned to look into his wife’s eyes. “As I learned when I was courting his sister.” They smiled at each other.

Gabby and Paul turned to go. “It was nice meeting you, Renata. Bye, Steph. We’ll see you later at Mom’s, right, Tony?”

“Sure. And Paul? Watch out, I’m eager for a game of football.”

“You got it.” Paul gave Tony a fist bump to the shoulder as they left to visit with other people.

Tony turned back to Stephanie and Renata, since their group had shrunk to three. “What are your plans for this afternoon?” He sipped his coffee.

“I have some unpacking to do,” Renata answered.

Tony frowned. “Sounds like a less than relaxing way to spend the day. I will pick you up around six-thirty on Thursday. I work until six when my brother will come to fill in for me. I apologize in advance if I arrive smelling like garlic.” He winked.

“You are forgiven in advance.” Renata giggled. “Does that mean we won’t be bothered by vampires?” She glanced up at him.

Where did that come from? I can’t believe I said that! A cute guy looks at me, and I become mush? Oh, I am in trouble. Haven’t I learned anything from the past?

Tony laughed, nodded and lifted his Styrofoam coffee cup in salute. “Till then.”

Stephanie led Renata away. She resisted the urge to look back at Tony.

What had she gotten herself into?

Want to find out what happens? *Pesto & Potholes* can be purchased through all major eBook retailers.

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